Multilingual Awareness in Japan
A national survey of young people's attitudes

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A Language Awareness study, with a focus on multilingualism, was conducted involving 973 first-year, first-term students at fifteen 4-year universities located throughout Japan. Questions were asked about the number of languages in the world, the most important features of language in society and what languages are used in multilingual societies such as Britain, America, Japan and Brazil. The aim of the survey was not to elicit stereotypes but rather to obtain an objective picture about young people's understanding of language in globalized society. The results indicate that students (1) believe that the world contains a small number of languages, (2) stress the primary importance of language as a marker of 'ethnicity' rather than communication, (3) understand that English is one of the languages of Japan, (4) view Japan as multilingual, (5) do not rank Arabic, Bengali and Hindi highly in the world's languages, and (6) can seldom identify spoken 'Okinawan' (Ryukyuan) and only marginally identify spoken Ainu.

多言語主義に焦点を当てた「言語に関する認識調査)」は、日本各地の 15 の 4 年制大学の学生 973 名を対象に、1 年生の 1 学期に実施したものである。この調査では、世界で使用される言語の数、社会における言語の特徴の中で最も重要なこと、イギリス、アメリカ、日本、ブラジルなど多言語社会においてはどのような言語が使用されているかなどについて質問した。この調査の目的は、グローバル化した社会の中で、若者たちが持つ言語に対する理解について、ステレオタイプではなく、客観的なイメージを得ることである。結果のいくつかを示すと、学生たちは、世界で使用される言語の数は比較的少ないと考えていること、言語はコミュニケーションの手段としてよりも「エスニシティー」を示すのが重要な役割と考えていること、英語は日本で用いられる言語の一つと言う認識があること、日本は多言語社会だという認識があること、アラビア語、ベンガル語、ヒンズー語は世界言語としてあまり重要と考えていないこと、耳で聞いても沖縄（琉球）語を沖縄語とめったに識別できず、アイヌ語はわずかにアイヌ語と識別できる程度であることなどが明らかになった。

Introduction

Familiarity with language involves a constellation of variable knowledge including beliefs and prejudices about writing and grammar, pronunciation and dialect, proper/improper usage, language and class, language and nation, bilingualism, etc. An individual's knowledge about language and how it works in society derives not merely from the possession of an idiolect; it is also constructed from a dynamic nexus of such social factors as ethnic contact, dialect, religious affiliation, migration experience, class and gender. Thus, if a person happens to come from a distinctive dialectal area (e.g. Liverpool or Osaka) or a bilingual family (e.g. Russian-Japanese, Korean-French), he or she is likely to possess some awareness of language variety, the standard/non-standard dialect continuum, code-switching, language loyalty and so on. With a focus upon people's perception and knowledge of language in the personal and national context, a broad-ranging survey of language attitudes in Japan was conducted in order to ascertain what people say they know about language. The assumption in this survey of young people's awareness of multilingualism is that not only do individuals possess views about language but that the potential for intellectual detachment from language itself is the result of being a language user.

Language in Japan: The aims of the survey.

The data presented here relate to multilingualism/bilingualism in the world and in Japan in particular. It has been noted elsewhere that the Japanese archipelago is multilingual and multicultural (Maher and Yashiro, 1995, Maher and Honna 1995, Maher and Macdonald 1994, Noguchi and Fotos 2001). Surveys of language attitudes in Japan have generally been carried out in designated speech communities, such as Sibata's investigations in Tokyo (Sibata, 1953) and Tohoku (Sibata, 1955), or in among specific age groups, such as Millar's study of university students (Millar, 1996). The current survey can be viewed as part of a more recent paradigm whereby Japan's language situation is being re-described as historically and contemporaneously multilingual.

Overall, the aim of the survey is not to search for confirmation of stereotypes, but rather to obtain a valid picture about language attitudes in contemporary society. What do we know about this language influence? In Japan, at the junior and senior high school levels, foreign language education has been part of the curriculum since the late nineteenth century, including instruction on German, Russian, French and English. Currently, English is the main foreign language taught in schools nationwide and is practically compulsory. Japanese schoolchildren's direct exposure to language analysis comes from the study of *kokugo* ('national language'), this being subcategorized into *gendaibun* ('modern Japanese'), *koten* ('classical Japanese') and *kanbun* ('Chinese classics'). The direct influence of *Eigo kyoiku* (English education) in the promotion of generalized language awareness is not known to have been systematically investigated. A variety of foreign languages are taught at university. We assume that information on issues concerning language can be introduced tangentially in the school curriculum. Likewise, it is assumed that general knowledge about language is dealt with digressively in university curricula–excepting in courses where students are linguistics or communication majors. People 'pick up' information about language and form opinions from many varied sources, including friends, literature, the mass media and various other social networks. Most likely, a person's knowledge about language is subject to chance, vicarious learning and occasionally systematic

learning experiences in educational contexts. What and how much knowledge about language has been 'picked up'?

The significance of a study that attempts to answer such questions can be established with reference in the first instance to the rich history of work in the social sciences, especially in the empirical tradition pioneered by Almond and Verba (1963) in their investigation of political cultures using a survey that comprised (*inter alia*) cognitive questions. A core conviction emerging from this tradition, albeit much challenged and contested, is the proposition that active and effective participation in liberal democracies requires the acquisition of political information, and that the construction and differentiation of concepts, views and voting preferences starts from this base. The position taken here is analogous to this proposition: we believe that the possession of linguistic knowledge, as opposed to folk explanations, is an essential strand in the educational development of global consciousness. As will become clear throughout the paper, many of the assumptions underlying the students' responses present linguists and language educators alike with a formidable challenge.

Method

A Language Awareness study was conducted in Japan involving 973 respondents (327 male, 572 female, 74 unknown). The average age of the participants was 19 years 2 months. The study was designed to elicit young people's knowledge of and miscellaneous attitudes towards language and language use. The data were collected by means of a paper-based questionnaire, in Japanese only, from first-year students enrolled in their first semester of university. The complete questionnaire comprised 61 questions, most of which were multiple-choice, although some were open-ended. The analysis in this article will focus on just nine of the open-ended questions, all of which relate to language awareness. The results shown here relate to questions about the major languages of the world, identification of sound samples from a variety of languages including indigenous languages of Japan (Ainu and Okinawan), elicitation of what might be considered the primary function of language, and also what languages might be associated with selected countries (Britain, USA, Japan, Brazil). Students were selected and monitored by their class teachers and were required to respond during a designated class period.

The sites comprised fifteen 4-year universities located throughout Japan, including each of the main islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu and Okinawa. Students from International Christian University were chosen for earlier pilot versions of the questionnaire but did not participate in the final study. Data results were collated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 15.0).

Discussion of findings

As outlined above, the analysis in this article will focus on the extent to which Japanese young people are aware of language. We will look at their awareness of language in general, their perceptions about other languages, and the nature of multilingual society. Specifically, we will address the extent to which the respondents recognized various world languages, their estimates of the number of languages that exist across the globe, and which languages they consider the most extensively spoken. In addition, we will explore those features of language in general that the respondents consider most salient, and identify the languages they associate with various nations. The results of the survey indicate that, while their own knowledge of specific

languages may be incomplete, these Japanese young people are aware of the multilingual nature of various countries, including their own.

Recognizing various world languages

What is the language recognition level of college-age students? Respondents were asked to listen to twice-repeated tape recordings of speakers from 14 languages and to then write down the name of the language they thought was being spoken.
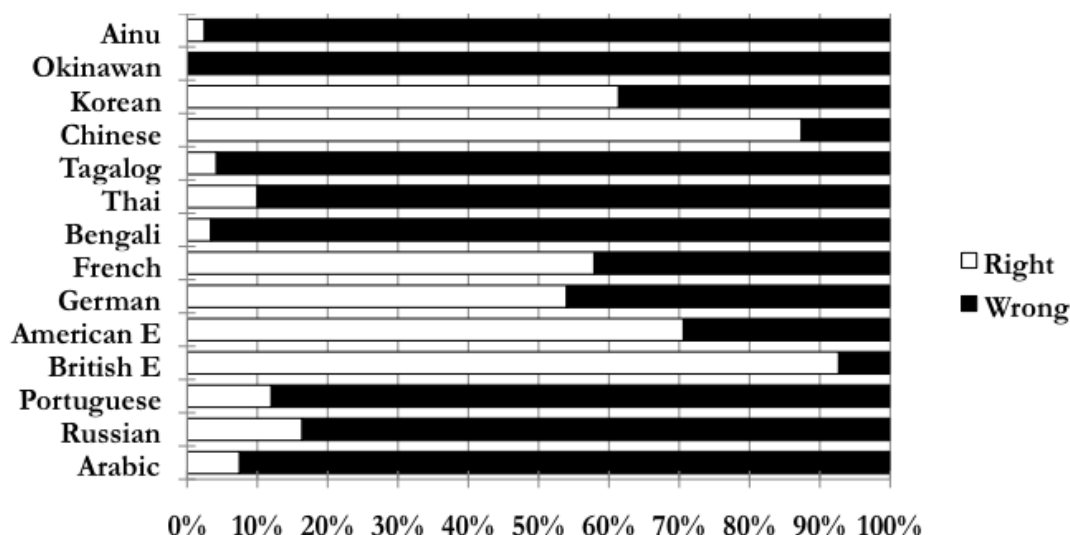

Figure 1. Identification of audio samples of languages of the world

The majority of the respondents correctly identified six of the 14 languages presented as audio samples in response to Question 1. Okinawan was completely unfamiliar to these students, while, another indigenous language, Ainu, was likewise recognized by hardly any of the respondents. Those languages that were recognized by the majority of respondents included English, Chinese, Korean, French and German. The size of the majority varied from a low of 53% of participants' recognition of German, to a high of 92% recognition of British English. Two samples of English, by separate speakers, were supplied. It was expected that participants would be able to identify these as generic English but it was not hypothesized as to the ability to identify varieties. A smaller, though still sizeable majority (70%), correctly identified American English as a distinct linguistic variety. Substantial majorities correctly identified (Mandarin) Chinese (88%) and Korean (62%). Only a small minority of participants correctly identified seven of the other eight languages represented and, as mentioned above, the lowest recognition rate (2%) was for Ainu, a minority language indigenous to the Japanese archipelago.

Non-responses to the audio samples that were over 10% included Ainu, 14.3%; Okinawan, 21.1%; Portuguese, 11.4%; Arabic, 15.7%; Tagalog, 11.6%; Thai, 13.2%; Bengali, 20.0%; Russian, 13.8%. This low rate of response likely indicates that these languages were less familiar to the students.

Being from Hokkaido apparently does not necessarily make one more familiar with Ainu. The percentage of students from a college in Hokkaido that were able to correctly identify Ainu was 8.9%, compared with 2.4% for the rest. A chi-square

analysis indicates that this is a statistically significant difference. However, the sample from Hokkaido is disproportionately small: 56 respondents, of whom only five were able to identify Ainu correctly–leaving open the question whether this difference was chance or not. An analysis was also conducted comparing respondents whose hometown was in Hokkaido versus those whose was not. The sample here was even smaller: only 51 respondents were from Hokkaido. Of them, 7.8% (four respondents) correctly identified Ainu, compared with 2.6% of the rest. A chi-square analysis indicates that this difference is marginally significant.

None of the respondents recognized Okinawan (sample from Standard Okinawa, i.e. 'Shuri' dialect), the only other indigenous language represented.

Perception of the number of languages in the world

The question "How many languages do you think exist in the world?" was designed to ascertain the students' general knowledge concerning world languages. This is the kind of question that typically arises in courses such as 'Introduction to Language' or 'Anthropology 101'. The question indicates a degree of knowledge about cultural diversity and multicultural societies across the national territory spectrum.
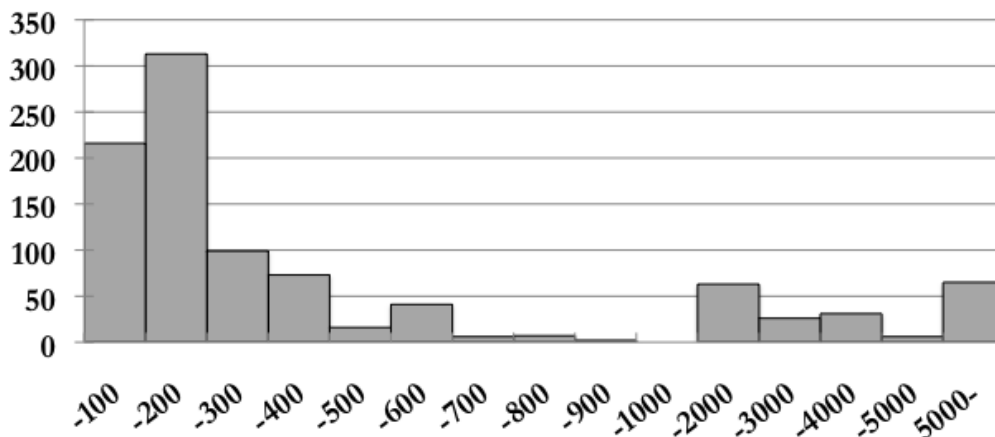

Figure 2. Estimation of number of languages in the world

The responses to Question 2 confirmed the results of Millar's study (Millar, 1996), and indicated a strong awareness among Japanese students of the fact that the world is full of many languages. A minority of the students in Millar's study (17.5%) gave a low figure of between 10 and 100 languages, while the current study reveals higher estimates. The majority of the participants (85%) gave estimates in the hundreds, while the minority was closer to the truth (approximately 4.500-6000) in estimating the number to be in the thousands. Non-responses to this question accounted for 0.9% of the respondents.

The 'biggest' languages in the world

One point of general knowledge relates to knowledge of 'big' languages. This question captures the popular imagination since big and small may sometimes carry undertones of power and influence. Therefore, the next question on the survey asked participants to consider, "What are the five 'biggest' languages in the world in terms of the number of native speakers?" The languages they chose are ranked below from 1 to 5 in descending order of (participant-perceived) size.
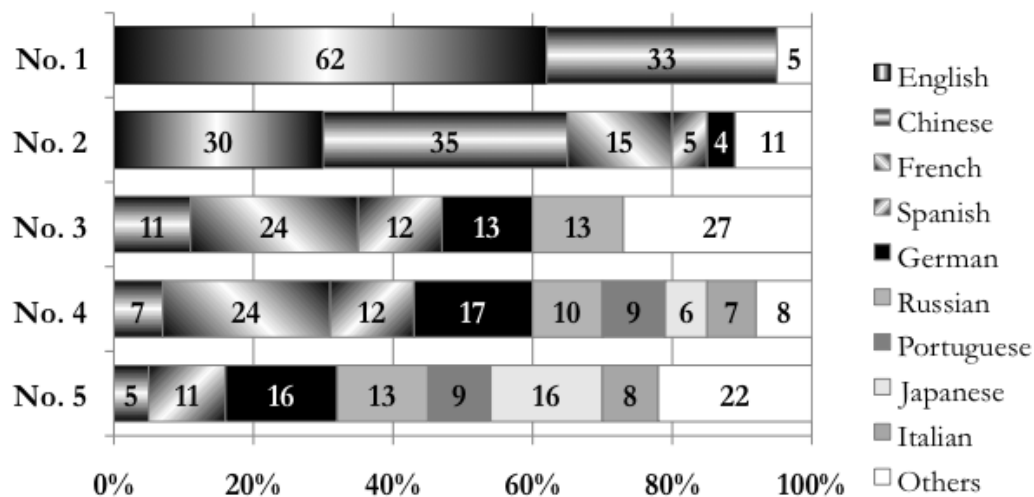
Figure 3. Perceptions of the five languages with the most native speakers

Although at first sight the results appear fragmented and difficult to interpret, they reveal some fascinating insights into Japanese young people's impressions of world languages. Only two Asian languages, Chinese and Japanese, feature with any particular prominence, while seven European languages with varying numbers of native speakers in real as well as relative terms, feature across the 'size' spectrum. A small number of respondents identified Hindi, Arabic, Bengali and other non-European languages within the rankings but these were too few in number to include in the histogram that presents the findings.

The absence of these specific languages in the participants' responses is significant: in reality, Hindi is No. 2, Arabic is No. 5, and Bengali No. 7 (Lewis, 2009). It is likely that these language regions themselves are not well-known. Although the reasons are not clear, the do invite speculation. India might be regarded by Japanese university students as a largely English-speaking nation. Though the Bangladeshi migrant-worker in Japan briefly became a media topic in Japan in the 1990s, neither the country nor the language was well-known. Note there are currently 11,414 Bangladeshi nationals registered foreigners in Japan (Japan Ministry of Justice, 2009). Many of the respondents ranked various European languages highly, even though in reality they do not figure in the top five. The students felt German, for example, represented one of the world's top languages in terms of speaker population, when in fact the number of native speakers is less than 100 million. The opposite was true of Spanish, which the respondents generally ranked below German, even though it actually has the third largest worldwide population of native speakers. The size of the French speaker population was also overestimated, featuring prominently in ranks 2-4. There are many more Portuguese and Russian speakers than French speakers, but knowledge of this was not reflected in the students' survey responses. They took French to be a much 'bigger' language than it really is.

Even though most Japanese students should be aware of the actual population of their own country, a small number of respondents, 6% and 16% respectively, ranked the Japanese language in fourth and fifth places.

The majority of respondents (wrongly) ranked English as the 'biggest' language (62%). It featured only in the top two ranks, with 30% (again incorrectly) placing it in second place. In reality it should come in fourth place, after Spanish.

Chinese featured in all ranks, named by the following proportion of respondents: No. 1 = 33%, No. 2 =35%, No. 3=11%, No. 4=7%, No. 5=5%. The majority underestimated its size: in reality, Chinese is in top place.

A follow-up question sought to ascertain what students considered the five 'biggest' languages in the world in terms of the number of both native and non-native speakers. Their responses were ranked 1-5 in descending order beginning with the largest perceived aggregate speaker population.
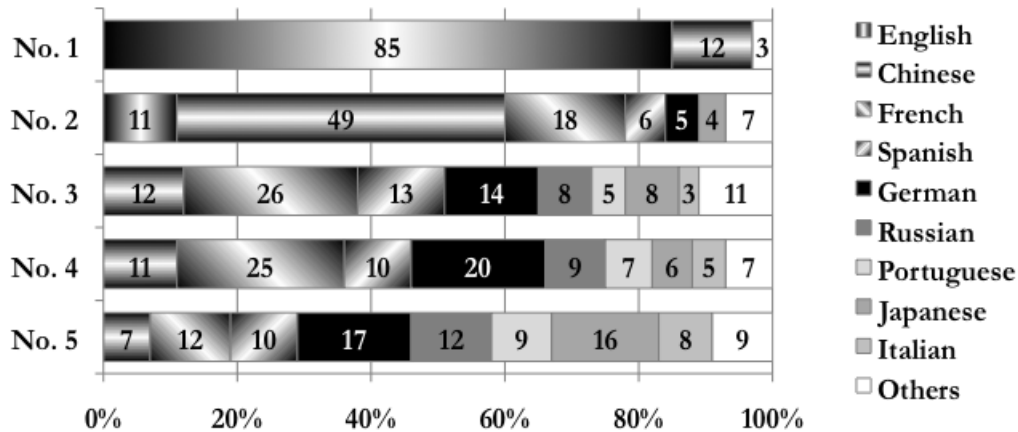

Figure 4. Perceptions of the five languages with the most native and non-native speakers

As outlined in Figure 4, 82.5% of the respondents correctly identified English as the 'biggest' language in this particular sense, with a smaller percentage ranking Chinese in first place. Likewise, 48.8% correctly identified Chinese as the second 'biggest' language, but the percentages for the other languages reflected some of the same overestimates and underestimates discussed in the previous section. French, English, Spanish, German and Japanese were ranked No. 2 by small percentages of the survey cohort, descending from 17% to 3%. The results for the third rank were fragmented into small proportions, naming a subset of the languages already discussed: French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Portuguese and Italian. A permutation on this pattern of responses can be seen in the findings for the languages ranked in fourth and fifth places. Again, it is the absence of the sub-continental languages and Arabic which is most conspicuous.

Language and ethnicity

What is the most important feature of language in general? What is the main function of language? The issue 'What is language?' is a perennial topic and linguists are disposed to foreground one or more features towards an explanation–perhaps to join Wittgenstein's language game whereby we cannot give a completely satisfying definition of something but, on the contrary, we can definitely point to what it is. We know that Japanese and Swedish are languages, but what constitutes their functional core? Is the goal of language to permit communication? Clearly not in some cases. Does language signal a particular ethnicity? Clearly not in perhaps most cases. A person can speak Japanese natively and 'be' Brazilian or Scottish.
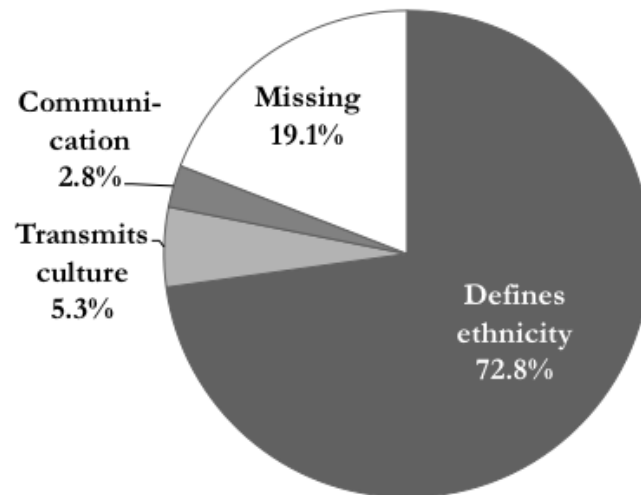
Figure 5. Perceptions of the most important feature of a language

What then are the most important features of language? The present study asked this to the students as an open question, and then sorted the responses into a small number of categories, unlike Millar (1996), which provided three categories from which the respondents had to select. The results of these two surveys could not be further apart. The study reported here found that the majority of participants (72.8%) stressed the primary importance of language as a marker of 'ethnicity', whereas Millar's earlier study found that the communicative aspect of language was most highly rated by the majority (81%). It is possible to speculate that the difference between the results may lie in the generality and indeed in the abstraction of the term 'language'. Perhaps the 1996 group had a particular exemplar in mind (say, English, in all its global glory and promise) while the present cohort may have been thinking about the dominant language of their own national context, and therefore highlighted this role instead. Why a significant proportion (19%) did not respond is open to speculation. The question requires both the capability and effort to reflect swiftly on how language manifests itself as a relational system of speech codes, and also on how language works as a social institution. This question may have proved too demanding for some participants.

Comparative multilingualism in Japan, Britain, Brazil and the USA

Multilingual society dictates that no society is driven by dependency on one language alone. Globalizing communities, migration, intercommunication, older mother tongues and newer languages combine to create multilingual societies. Respondents were asked to list the languages they associate with the following countries: 1) Japan 2) Britain 3) Brazil 4) USA.

Responses to this question were prompted by an exemplar:

Canada: *English, French, Inuit, Native American Indian, Italian, American Sign Language*
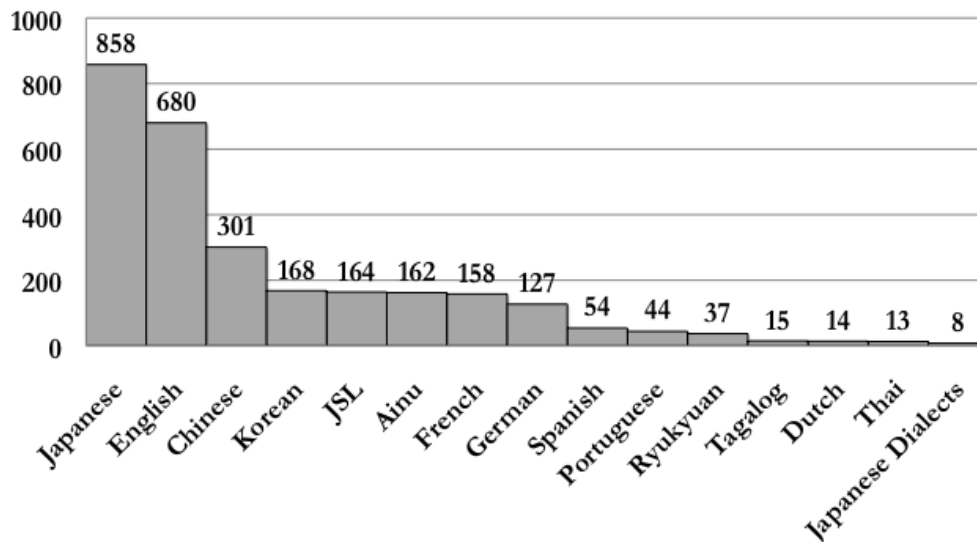
Figure 6. Languages associated with Japan

It is clear that the majority of respondents (over 85%) see Japanese as dominant in association with the nation state. Curiously, a small minority of respondents seems not to have thought of Japanese at all, and did not name the national language in their lists. Also of interest is the fact that a very large number name English in association with the country. This almost certainly adds weight to Tsukahara's (2002) commentary on the ideological questions raised by the use of English in Japan. Domestic flights and trains operate a bilingual policy without regard to surveys of actual passenger needs. Whilst resident and tourist Chinese and Korean passengers greatly outnumber English-speaking foreigners in Japan, they are assumed to be competent in Japanese. The result lends weight to the view that English, whilst not an official language of Japan, is a language that Japanese identify and associate with themselves, and that functions in the context of a linguistically plural Japan. English is therefore prominent as an associative language, followed by Chinese, Korean (community languages) and Japanese Sign Language. Awareness of JSL might be the result of JSL's increasing profile in the media (film and TV); however, some participants may have mentioned JSL due to the fact that ASL was listed in the exemplar provided in the survey instrument. Ryukyuan, on the geographical periphery, was identified as a language of association by 37 participants, which was less than those who identified Ainu. Whilst Okinawa is well-known in the media and as a tourist destination, the language may be less marked in public awareness than Ainu (Responses comprising 'Okinawan', 'Shuri' and 'Ryukyuan' were subsumed into the category 'Ryukyuan').
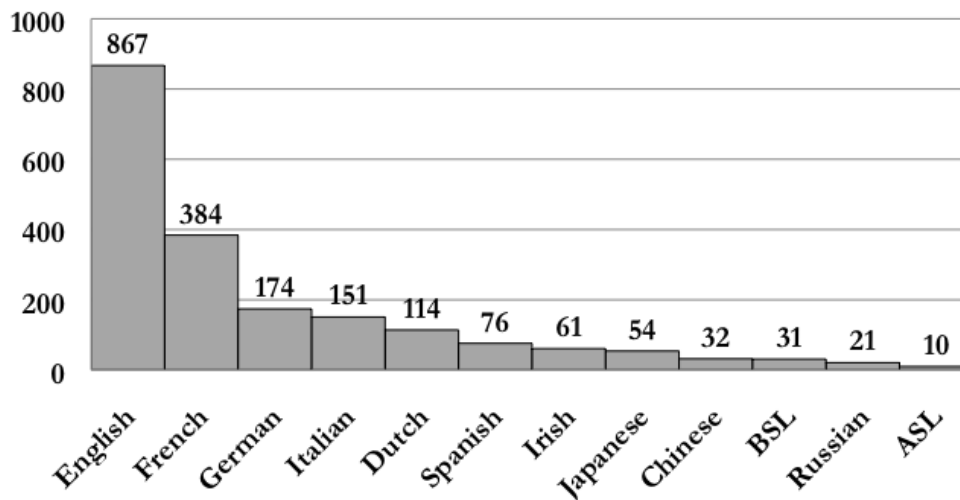
Figure 7. Languages associated with Britain

Predictably, and in parallel with the first part of the question, Britain is most strongly associated with English, being nominated by the vast majority of respondents (86.7%). Again, a small minority has overlooked this language completely. Ideas about contemporary multicultural and multilingual Britain are relatively undeveloped and the other languages mentioned in the responses appear to have been shaped by the same attitudes reflected in the erroneous responses to earlier questions in the survey. European languages are mentioned by the respondents as follows: French (38%), German (17%), and Dutch, Italian, Spanish and Russian by small percentages varying from 2% to 15%. It is interesting to note the first mention of a European language unseen in earlier responses, i.e. Irish, albeit by only 6.4%. What we now have to regard as the two most familiar Asian languages, Japanese and Chinese, are mentioned by small numbers corresponding to 6.4% and 3.2% respectively. A few participants remembered that sign languages would commonly figures in British life and mention BSL. Since ASL is learned internationally as a Deaf Sign *lingua franca*, a listing for Britain might be unsurprising. There is no mention of any of the 'large' sub-continental languages, nor of Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Polish, Somali, or any of the other 240 or more languages spoken by 14% of primary school pupils and 10% of secondary school pupils in England and Wales, and other data supporting a story of diversity in Scottish schools, with a smaller percentage of pupils in both parts of the system (4%) speaking a total of 138 languages (http://www.cilt.org.uk/).
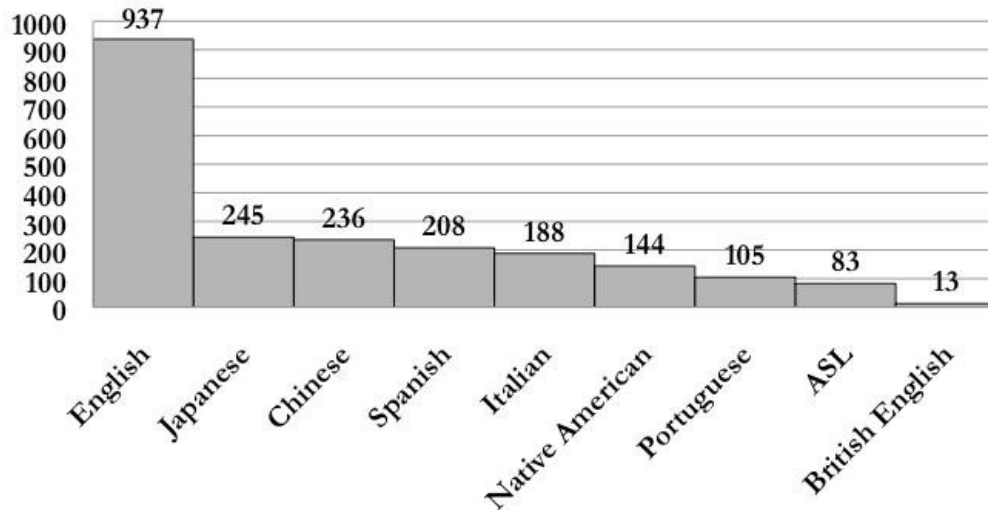
Figure 8. Languages associated with Brazil

The case of Brazil appeared to be difficult for many of the participants to judge. Almost equal numbers of students, (54% and 51% respectively) identified English and Portuguese in association with that country. Spanish and Japanese were mentioned by large minorities as well.
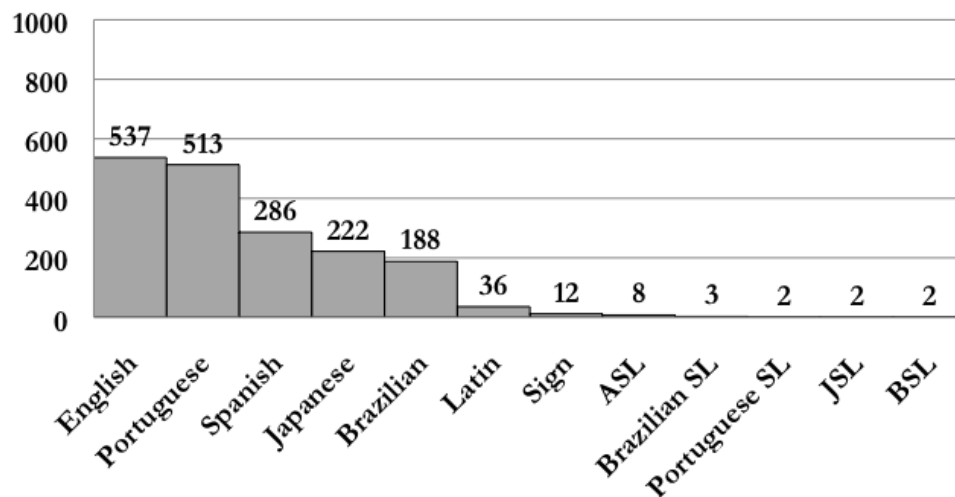

Figure 9. Languages associated with the United States of America

Finally, the polyglot nature of the US was painted with greater assurance by respondents. Almost all of them mentioned English, and the two Asian languages Japanese and Chinese, were again mentioned by large minorities, presumably on the

basis of familiarity. Similar numbers mentioned Spanish, Italian, Native American and Portuguese. Some students suggested 'British English' as one of the languages of the USA. Absent from the list are French, German, Vietnamese and Tagalog which, historically, feature prominently among North American language communities. The short list of languages mentioned in association with the US is in contrast to the reality.

Conclusion

Two canonical questions arise from this survey, along with the glimmers of an answer. Firstly, in response to the question, "Do language majors have a more developed sense of multilingual awareness?" we would have to answer in the affirmative. We grouped all foreign language-related majors (English/British/ American literature, linguistics, Chinese literature, German literature, and German language) into one group, and conducted an analysis to see if this group gave a bigger number to the question, "How many languages in the world?" The result indicated that there is a weak but significant relationship, with foreign language-related majors giving larger answers than other students. One conclusion that can be drawn from this result is that foreign language majors indeed seem to have a more developed sense of multilingual awareness. Secondly, in response to the question, "Is there any gender/age difference in multilingual awareness?" we would have to say no. There was no difference, for example, in the number of world languages listed by males and females in the current survey, and neither did older students list larger numbers. However, there may be other indices of multilingual awareness that have been neglected.

On the results indicate some awareness of a multilingual world that comprises multilingual nation states, a world in which there is no absolute correspondence between a single nation state and a single language. The respondents view their own nation state as one that features a pattern of linguistic diversity similar to that of other states.

On the negative side, there is oversight and lack of awareness about other matters multilingual. Aside from the two 'best known' Asian languages, a small number of European languages with varying degrees of reach occupy privileged positions in the consciousness of Japanese young people, while other Asian languages do not register significantly. This is not surprising. The economic utility and cultural value of languages is differential and can be ranked accordingly. Thus, there is no reason to suppose that Indonesian or Hindi would feature largely over French. However, as a result, the world seems to be perceived as less multilingual than it is.

The results may reflect an enduring view of the world as a largely colonized space, where European languages have supplanted local tongues even in countries whose native languages have sustained strong literary traditions through to the present day. However, this raises deeper questions about the relative visibility of and acquaintance with the names of particular languages: how is it that languages with large numbers of speakers are so invisible, so unknown? Clearly, these Japanese university students are informed by a different point of reference, and one that does not correspond to *size*, but rather to *significance*. The languages which are listed in response to the questions discussed here correspond rather neatly to Weber's list of the ten 'most influential languages' (Weber, 2008). Weber's argument that size is only one of several factors contributing to salience is certainly borne out by this study.

Crystal (2000) and Nettle and Romaine (2002), among others, have alerted us to the need to for public understanding of language shift, language loss and death. We suggest that our understanding of language is complex knowledge that needs to be carefully examined. It need not begin with lament and melodrama over a decline of awareness (which has not been the focus of this study), but rather with an assertion of the facts of language life, and of the continuing story of the multiplicity of language, in all its varied forms; mainstream and minority, national, official and non-official, and so on. Linguists and educators have work to do in helping students grasp the facts of language life.

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Appendix
Questionnaire

Question on audio samples (Figure 1)
これからテープに録音された１４の言語を聞いてください。それぞれの言語は２度流されます。そしてそれらが何語で話されているかを考え、まずカッコの中にかっこの中にその言語の名前を書き込んでください。　一人が話し終えてから、次の人が話し始めるまで、２０秒の間隔があります。それでは、始めます。

Question on estimation of number of languages (Figure 2)
世界にはおよそいくつの言語があると思いますか。言語の数を記入してください。

Question on the biggest languages of the world (Figures 3 and 4)
世界中の言語の中で、その言語をネイティヴ・スピーカーとして毎日の生活の中で話している人の数が最も多い５つの言語は何でしょう？多い順に１から５まで、言語名を記入してください。

世界中の言語の中で、ネイティヴ・スピーカーもそうでない人も含めて毎日の生活の中で話している人の数が最も多い５つの言語は何でしょう。多い順に１から５まで、言語名を記入してください。

Question on the most important feature of language (Figure 5)
言語の最も重要な要素は次のどれだと思いますか。１つ選び、その記号を〇で囲んでください。
　　　１　コミュニケーションの手段である。
　　　２　民族を定義する手段である。
　　　３　文化を伝承する手段である。

Questions on the languages associated with specific countries (Figures 6-9)
つぎに挙げられた国のリストを見て、それぞれの国でどんな言語が使われているか、思いつく限りの言語をいくつでも記入してください。（言語の名称は完全に正確でなくても構いません。）
例：カナダ：英語、フランス語、イヌイット語、カナダのインディアンの言語、イタリア語、アメリカ手話

　　　日本：
　　　イギリス：
　　　ブラジル：
　　　アメリカ：